

High Performance High Schools Initiative:

A White Paper on Improving Student Achievement in California's High Schools

Background

The academic achievement of students in California's elementary schools – and to a somewhat lesser extent our middle schools – is steadily increasing. This is the result of a diligent effort by the whole of the education community. In significant part, their efforts have been aided by a comprehensive state strategy that has included:

- High academic expectations, particularly in the core subjects of English-language arts, mathematics, science, and history-social science.
- Improvement in the pre-service training and professional development of teachers and administrators.
- A new generation of instructional materials that give teachers the tools necessary to deliver more rigorous content.

Unfortunately, California's high schools are not following the general trend toward increased student achievement. Less than 10 percent of our high schools have reached the optimum level of 800 on the Academic Performance Index, and over the past four years high schools have met annual API growth targets only about 40 percent of the time on average.

We simply must concentrate attention on our high schools – not to disparage the work of the thousands of teachers and administrators who educate our teens – but to give them the same types of focused, comprehensive assistance we have given our elementary and middle schools. We must turn the tide in a positive direction, putting our high schools on the path to higher achievement.

Recent findings from an *Education Trust* study show – shockingly – that the solid gains our nation's students are achieving during the K-8 experience actually tend to erode when these students enter high school. Additional evidence of lower-than-

acceptable achievement in many of our high schools comes from the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). Data from the administration of CAHSEE to students in the Classes of 2004 and 2005 suggest that perhaps as many as 20 percent of students might not have passed the exam by the end of grade 12 (though some argue the actual percentage would have been much lower). Because a significant number of these students might have failed CAHSEE due to the lack of educational opportunities provided them, the State Board of Education delayed CAHSEE's consequences until the Class of 2006. All of this stands as important testimony that business cannot continue as usual. It is entirely possible for California's high schools to match the API growth rates being realized by our elementary and middle schools, and high schools must be held to reaching that goal over the next three years.

As we focus attention on the achievement of our high school students, we must be both broad – looking at the whole of each school – and particular – ensuring that achievement goes up commensurately for all: female and male students, racial and ethnic subgroups, English learners, and disabled students. We must also use strategically the powerful leverage provided by the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)* with its emphasis on English-language arts, mathematics, and science at the high school level, and its call for Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives.

In aggregate, these data illustrate that the majority of California's 1,830,664 high school students simply are not reaching the academic levels needed to succeed in tomorrow's economy, postsecondary education, or as effective citizens. Dozens of reports over the past decade have described the huge mismatch between the highly skilled technical jobs available throughout the economy, and the lack of individuals emerging from the education system with the necessary academic and technical skills. The California Economic Strategy Panel describes this as the number one concern of California business, and a serious impediment to future economic growth. Education has a central basic purpose in developing responsible citizens and members of society, but it also plays a critical role in preparing people to be productive members of the workforce (Benner, Brownstein and Dean 1999). With approximately half of high school

graduates not pursuing postsecondary education, nearly two-thirds of high school students not adequately prepared to enter college, and approximately one-third of college entrants not completing a baccalaureate degree, it is clear that many students are not being equipped in high school with the skills necessary for success in the new economy (California School Boards Association 1999).

American high school students are not adequately prepared for their futures. Increasingly the economy demands completion of postsecondary education and training. There is a serious disconnect between aspirations and preparation. More than 97 percent of youth say they aspire to participate in some sort of postsecondary education, and 63 percent actually enroll.¹ Yet, little more than half actually take a mix of academic classes in high school that will prepare them for success either in college or in today's marketplace. More than one-quarter of the freshmen at four-year colleges – and nearly half of those at two-year colleges – do not advance to their second year. In the meantime, employers continue to bemoan the lack of essential academic skills among workers and the shortage of qualified applicants for jobs that require advanced education and training.

California *Education Code* §51228 is very clear about the purpose of high school:

- Each school district maintaining any of grades 7 to 12, inclusive, shall offer to all otherwise qualified pupils in those grades a course of study fulfilling the requirements and prerequisites for admission to the California public institutions of postsecondary education...
- Each school district maintaining any of grades 7 to 12, inclusive, shall offer to all otherwise qualified pupils in those grades a course of study that provides an opportunity for those pupils to attain entry-level employment skills in business or industry upon graduation from high school. Districts are encouraged to provide

¹ Ingels, S. J., Curtin, T.R., Kaufman, P., Alt, M. N., and Chen, X. "Coming of Age in the 1990s, The Eighth-Grade Class of 1988, 12 Years Later," (NCES 2002-321). Washington, DC: US Department of Education, NCES. <http://nces.ed.gov/survey/nels88/>.

all pupils with a rigorous academic curriculum that integrates academic and career skills, incorporates applied learning in all disciplines, and prepares all pupils for high school graduation and career entry.

These objectives envision high schools as high-quality educational experiences leading to postsecondary education and productive careers. These two dimensions provide clarity and direction. To achieve those ends, it is time to focus high school on meeting its legislated mission by strengthening instruction, improving achievement for all students, and minimizing the many distracters to achievement that have become the norm. This inside-out change must focus on improving classroom instruction first, and then organizing all aspects of the school to support instruction. Further, it is critical that measurably effective practices and strategies are identified and promoted statewide.

This White Paper is written to confront the challenge of improving high school performance and begin a process of fundamental change. California's Master Plan for Education states: "California has a long-standing commitment to providing a quality education at all levels." Additionally, "Californians have always sought to be the best, and have built a state like no other in the world." It is time for state and local policymakers to band together to continue those traditions and refocus and redesign high schools into high performance institutions preparing all students to the highest possible levels. In return, it will be possible for California to remain the world leader throughout the 21st century.

- California's high schools must be the gateway to opportunity for all children.
- High schools are where children go each day to learn about this country's past, present, and the possibilities for the future.
- High schools are where dreams are born, knowledge and skills learned, and lifelong habits forged.

The Campaign

The High Performance High Schools (HPS) initiative proposes critical state and local policy actions to guide high schools toward their primary role as educational institutions. The campaign focuses on five critical initiatives that are necessary for boosting high school achievement for all students. The initiative recognizes that individual high schools have varying levels of performance and readiness for change. To accommodate this variation, participating high schools will be asked to examine their data, determine the areas of highest need, and then implement significant changes in the five critical areas that will have the highest potential impact of improving performance. In addition, state lawmakers, the California Board of Education, and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction must collaborate in seeking legislation, enacting policy and regulatory changes, and aligning all efforts singularly on the goal of improving student achievement.

The initiative components include:

- Implementing High Expectations for ALL Students
- Fostering the Development of World Class Teachers and Site Administrators
- Developing World-Class Instructional Materials
- Creating and Supporting Successful Transitions to Postsecondary Education
- Nurturing and Developing a Community of Support for High Achieving Students

Implementing High Expectations for ALL Students

High expectations lead to higher achievement. It is no longer acceptable to focus high expectations only on the college-bound students. High expectations must become the norm within high school. Twenty years ago, the report “A Nation at Risk” called for more academic course taking among high school students. A rigorous curriculum built

on high standards is the key to increasing expectations for all students. Students of all abilities learn more in academically rigorous courses. There are several documented benefits for students who take challenging academic classes in high school, especially for those students considered “at risk” of failing.²

- Those who enter high school with test scores in the lowest quartile learn more in academically rigorous courses than they do in either the low-level vocational or general courses in which they are traditionally enrolled.³
- Students are more likely to pass high-level courses than low-level courses. Thus, the research suggests that increasing access by all students to advanced academic coursework will improve student academic achievement.⁴
- Students expected to master more demanding curricula are more likely to persist in school, achieve at higher levels, and be better prepared for the work force after their formal education ends.⁵

Too few students are taking academically rigorous courses. Postsecondary education and training is for virtually everyone. Certainly not all students will attend a traditional four-year college. However, virtually every youth will need some sort of postsecondary education and training. The challenge we face is to ensure that every student is adequately prepared with an academic foundation to take advantage of whatever future education he or she chooses.

A rich and deep curriculum is extremely important. This requires assigning all students to college prep (or “a-g”) courses. It also requires increasing numbers of students to be enrolled in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate

² Adelman, Clifford. “Answers in the Tool box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor’s Degree Attainment.” (Washington: US Department of Education, 1999). Available: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/toolbox/index.html>.

³ Lovesque, K. et al., “Vocational Education in the United States: Toward the Year 2000.” NCES 2000-029. US Department of Education, NCES, 2000. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000029.pdf>

⁴ Hallinen, Maureen T. “Ability Grouping and Student Learning” prepared for Brookings Papers on Education Policy Conference: “The American High School Today,” The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, May 14-15, 2002.

⁵ See: Adelman.

programs. Career academies can also provide a method to develop a rigorous college prep curriculum. All of the necessary safety nets and access to supportive programs must be made available to students so that they can be prepared to meet these challenges. Intervention programs in mathematics and reading are essential for struggling students. Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), for example, has successfully readied many students for postsecondary education and training who would have otherwise dropped out of high school. Many of these programs are more successfully implemented through the smaller learning communities model.

Fostering the Development of World Class Teachers and Site Administrators

Research clearly indicates that improving student achievement is a function of increasing the skills of educators. This focus also requires attracting the best and brightest to the field of education. There is an emerging consensus among researchers, policy-makers, and the public that one key to boosting student achievement is to ensure that a committed and highly skilled teacher is in every classroom. Though we still have much to learn about the specific attributes, experiences, and training that make a teacher an effective instructor, there is evidence that a teacher's subject matter expertise is linked to gains in student achievement.⁶ NCLB makes improving the expertise of America's teachers in the subjects they teach a central priority. Using an approximation of the NCLB definitions, the analysis conducted by the USDE found that only 54 percent of the nation's secondary teachers were highly qualified during the 1999-2000 school year. The percentage of highly qualified teachers ranged from 47 percent of mathematics teachers to 55 percent of science and social science teachers.⁷

California has made great strides in the preparation, support, and professional development of its teachers. We must stay the course with our support of teachers. Our

⁶ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Policy planning and Innovation. "Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge: The Secretary's, Second Annual Report on Teacher Quality." Washington, D.C., 2003.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Policy planning and Innovation. "Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Challenge: The Secretary's, Second Annual Report on Teacher Quality." Washington, D.C., 2003.

efforts must continue to focus in four areas 1) recruitment, 2) preservice, 3) support of new educators, and 4) continued support of the experienced teachers. Recruitment of talented college graduates and second-career individuals who reflect both gender and ethnic diversity. Preservice programs must continue to improve. Partnerships between school districts and universities are essential. California has developed an excellent program for new teacher support, entitled the Marian Bergeson Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment System (BTSA). It is necessary to continue to support this model of professional development and coaching. AB 466 has done an excellent job of providing ongoing, non-episodic professional learning for teachers in reading-language arts and mathematics and English. This model must be continued, and similar high-school-specific models must be created.

Equally alarming is the “graying” of our site administration population. Many of our highly qualified administrators will retire within the next five to –10 years. The education community is also growing concerned that many of the principal openings do not have an adequate pool of applicants. This is particularly true in our large urban high schools. In a similar manner to teachers, our efforts must be focused in the same four areas. Recruitment of talented educators is necessary, but perhaps we also need to examine the possibility of including some of our talented business leaders to the field of school administration.

Support of our new administrators is critical. California must develop a program of professional development and coaching similar to BTSA for our new administrators. AB 75 (chapter 697, statutes of 2001) shows great promise for continuing education for the experienced administrators. In order for the model to be successful for high school leaders, it will be necessary to develop additional modules that focus specifically for the issues of high school.

In addition, NCLB provides important resources for this work:

- Improving Teacher Quality State Grants
- Transition to Teaching

- The Mathematics and Science Partnership
- The Teaching of America's History
- At least 5 percent of a district's Title I funds.

Developing World Class Instructional Materials

Although there is a structured state adoption process for K-8 instructional materials, there is no statewide review or endorsement of high-school-level instructional materials. Districts are left on their own to adopt incredibly large and varied numbers high-school-level materials. Elementary principals and district administrators attribute much of their recent academic progress to structured, focused standards-aligned materials that provide the appropriate amount of support for both the novice and experienced teacher.

This component of the HPHS initiative proposes to develop a state level process of review for standards alignment in each of the four core subject areas. This process would utilize classroom teachers and content experts to determine alignment to the high school standards. By aligning the materials to the state standards, there would be the additional assurance of providing materials that would prepare students for success in college and other postsecondary endeavors. By providing a state-level standards review process, the state would also remove some of the burden from districts that presently must conduct their own reviews in order to ensure standards alignment.

Creating and Supporting Successful Transitions to Postsecondary Education

High schools must exist in partnership with the institutions that send students, and the institutions to which its students are delivered. Carefully assessing and planning with middle school, will enable high schools to properly place students in the correct courses, and make early identification of students needing targeted interventions. It is important that curricula seamlessly connect between high schools and middle schools, and that content area teachers from both levels are regularly connected to build understanding and lessons that help students advance.

Parents have higher educational aspirations for their children than ever before. Eighty-six percent of parents want their children to pursue some postsecondary education.⁸ The National Education Longitudinal Study, which followed a nationally representative sample of eighth grade students beginning in 1988, found that 88 percent of eighth graders expected to participate in some form of postsecondary education right after high school.⁹ Twelve years later, the study found that 63 percent of these students had attended some type of postsecondary institution following high school,¹⁰ 47 percent had earned some college credits, and 30 percent had completed a bachelor's degree or higher.¹¹ Making matters worse is our current system of college advising. K-12 educators cite a number of problems with our preparation system including inequitable college advising by counselors and teachers and a general lack of teacher knowledge of college preparation issues.¹²

Additionally, there is a strong need to develop state-endorsed high school intervention programs in English-language arts and mathematics for students performing at the below basic or far below basic level on California Standards Tests and for students who are failing the CAHSEE. For the state to ensure the instructional gains, it must ensure that instructional materials promote ambitious student outcomes for all students, and also align practices and actions within schools, districts, and the state to promote such outcomes (Visher, Emanuel, and Teitelbaum 1999.)

Data also indicate that minority students graduate from high school, enroll in college, and complete college at much lower rates than other students. In 2001, 55 percent of

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 2003. Survey of Income and Program Participation 1996 Panel, Wave6. www.census.gov/population/socdemo/well-being/pg_70-89/98tabD13.pdf.

⁹ U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 1996 "National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-1994: Descriptive Summary Report." Washington, DC <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/96175.html>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 1996 "National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-1994: Descriptive Summary Report." Washington, DC <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/96175.html>

¹¹ U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 2003. "The Condition of Education. 2003" NCES 2003-067. Washington, D.C.

¹² Veneziz, A., M.W. Kirst and A.L. Antonio. 2003 "Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education systems Undermine Student Aspiration."

African American and 52 percent of Hispanic high school graduates enrolled immediately in college compared to 64 percent of white graduates.¹³

The connection with postsecondary systems is also important. The initiative proposes expanding the use of the wide variety of successful strategies to prepare students for postsecondary education. These programs (including AVID, college outreach, and partnership academies) help students to reach higher achievement levels and to formulate solid transition plans. Implementing the California State University Early Assessment Programs, Early College High Schools, and written articulation agreements or compacts will also provide systemic connections to increase student access to the postsecondary level.

High schools must also assist students in preparing to enter their careers whether following high school, community college, or the baccalaureate degree. Expanding career academies, integrated career pathways, and Regional Occupational Programs provides students with high-level career exploration, training, and work experience. Expanding schools' business partnerships, pre-apprenticeship programs, and Tech Prep programs with the California Community Colleges will open more advanced career options for students.

American business leaders have been among the strongest advocates for school improvement. They understand that their long-term success is tightly linked to the quality of the individuals that leave our schools. A recent survey highlights this concern about workforce quality.¹⁴ Eighty percent of responding businesses said that they had a "moderate to serious" shortage of qualified candidates. They cited poor reading, writing, math, verbal communication, and English language skills as issues. Programs such as ROC/Ps and career and partnership academies will develop these skills in the context

¹³ U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 2003. "The Condition of Education. 2003" NCES 2003-067. Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ National Association of Manufactures, Anderson, and Center for Workforce success. 2001 "The Skill Gap 2001" Washington, D.C.

of a career interest. Academies also provide expanded opportunities for application of the small learning communities model.

Nurturing and Developing a Community of support for High Achieving Students

Every school must be a community of learning. High schools are likewise a critical component of successful communities. High schools will only be successful if all stakeholders are involved in their improvement. Critical stakeholders of course are parents and guardians, and they must be made full partners in the high school experience. No one can afford to sit on the sidelines when it comes to improving student achievement. Small and large businesses, higher education, teachers, administrative and support staff associations, community-based organizations, and public agencies have a vested interest in the improvement of all schools, but especially of high schools. Stakeholders must be engaged at deeper levels of involvement, helping to develop improvement plans, and build understanding and commitment within the community for redesigning high schools. This component of the HPHS initiative promotes stakeholders assisting high schools in implementing innovation programs, and approaches, such as smaller learning communities, thematic and magnet schools, flexible scheduling, and expanded Service Learning and Community Service Programs. It will take the entire community's commitment to transform the tradition and structure of the past into designs for new high performance high schools.

Why we must act now

Over the past five years, California's, public high school enrollment has increased by 14 percent and is projected to increase a like amount over the next five years. It is time for every stakeholder, including educational leaders, businesses, and foundations, to focus on transforming California high schools into places where all students can master rigorous academic content standards and have the ability to choose from solid postsecondary education and career-technical options. This effort will require a

consistent and committed partnership of parents, guardians, students, teachers, principals, and leaders at the local and state level.

More than ever, education is the dividing line between the “haves” and “have nots” in our society. If we are to advance economically and as a democracy, it is essential that we prepare all of our students to succeed.